

Distribution of mental health funding questioned

A prominent advocacy group for those suffering from severe mental illnesses has attacked the US Government's National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) for what it describes as a failure to invest sufficient research money in mental ailments such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and severe depression.

The report, released by the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI), has provoked divisions within the mental health community, which has otherwise achieved a remarkably high degree of unanimity in recent years with its efforts to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness, and achieve health insurance parity with other diseases.

NAMI, which advocates on behalf of an estimated 5.6 million Americans who suffer from the most serious mental disorders, believes that NIMH should reorder its priorities and let other institutes take the lead on behavioral problems and basic science involving the brain. Based on a review of research grants awarded by the institute during FY97, NAMI faulted NIMH for devoting only one-third of its research budget to basic studies on illnesses such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and severe depression—roughly \$152 million—and only 12% to treatment-related research on those diseases.

NIMH resources are also devoted to studying conditions such as learning disabilities and Alzheimer disease, eating disorders, smoking and gambling addiction, risky sexual practices that contribute to AIDS transmission, and school-based violence.

"We are not saying these aren't things worth studying, but if NIMH takes on everyone else's mandate as its own, it will have little left to do what should be its primary job," says Fuller Torrey, executive director of the Stanley Foundation for Research on Schizophrenia and Bipolar Disorder, a founder of NAMI.

In response, NIMH issued a statement saying that by its own calculation, 80% of its research money—amounting to \$351 million—was spent on work "relevant to mental illness or its underlying brain and behavioral science."

NIMH Director Steven Hyman points out that study grants can be interpreted in many ways, particularly since research often overlaps and can be applied to more than one disorder. Without basic scientific research into brain function—

which NIMH acknowledges is studied by other institutes as well as its own—there will not likely be cures for such serious mental illnesses as schizophrenia. NIMH's responsibility, says Hyman, is to all Americans suffering from depression—an estimated 19 million—most of whom are not afflicted by the severe illness Torrey describes. Their illness "takes a terrible toll," and to ignore milder forms of depression would be akin to "not doing research on chest pain and cholesterol, and focusing only on heart attacks," he says.

Gerald Fishbach, director of the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS), and the person rumored to be the successor to

Harold Varmus to lead the National Institutes of Health (NIH), agrees with Hyman, saying "neuroscience has evolved to the point where it is highly relevant to the missions of several of the NIH institutes." The NINDS awarded around \$648 million in research grants in FY99. Research funded by both institutes "does overlap, and the overlap is beneficial," Fishbach says, listing several new ventures the two agencies are planning together, ranging from molecular analysis of gene expression to behavioral and epidemiological analyses of cognitive and emotional health. "Certainly in the coming years when brain disorders will be among the most troubling and costly to this society, we need to work together as closely as possible," he says.

Marlene Cimons, Washington, DC

University stem cells for sale

In anticipation of an increased demand for human embryonic stem (ES) cells by federally funded scientists, who might be allowed to carry out research on these cells for the first time if National Institutes of Health (NIH) guidelines are implemented in the coming weeks, a branch of the University of Wisconsin, Madison has launched a company to sell these cells to scientists. However, such a service might be redundant if Congress passes a new bill allowing investigators to derive their own stem cells from *in vitro*-fertilized embryos. The bill was introduced on 31 January by biomedical-friendly senators Arlen Specter (R-PA) and Tom Harkin (D-IA). On the same day, the NIH extended its public comment period on the guidelines until 22 February.

James Thomson, the University of Wisconsin developmental biologist in whose laboratory human ES cells were first isolated, is the scientific director of the new business, the WiCell Research Institute. His lab has already received over 100 requests for cells, several of which were from private companies. Thomson's original work was funded by the biotechnology company Geron, but that company does not have a financial stake in WiCell because the patent (US patent number 5,843,780) on the isola-

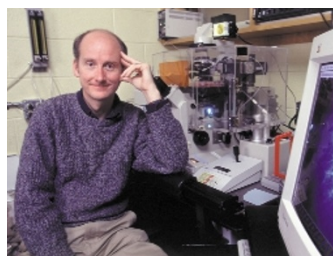
tion technology is owned by the university's non-profit patent management organization, the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation (WARF).

The NIH guidelines stress that stem cells to be used in research must be obtained through payment that does not exceed "reasonable costs;" in other

words, federally funded scientists should not buy cells from suppliers who are making a profit on the exchange. Although WARF is a non-profit group and does not aim to make money from academic researchers, its managing director, Carl Gulbrandsen, explains

that WiCell "does not intend to operate at a loss either." The initial cost to academics will be a one-time fee of \$5,000 for the ES material and a paid-up license. "We will be monitoring our costs. Our hope is that the fee will not have to be raised and perhaps can be lowered," he adds. Privately funded researchers will pay a substantially larger fee and also be liable for a yearly maintenance fee. All investigators must sign a material transfer and license agreement, which enables them to carry out research only. If the researcher intends to develop a commercial product, they must seek a further license from WARF.

Karen Birmingham, London



James Thomson